

Illinois Teens on the Home Front

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World War II was fought on other than battle fields, by other than soldiers who fought with weapons and faced danger. These warriors included women, teenagers, and their front was the home front. "*Home front* is a term invented in Europe to describe a new reality, the reality of total war," according to historian Albert Marrin. It was the job of these homeland warriors to keep up with the demands of war, a daunting task.

Many teens took part in the scrap drive for metals, rubber, fats, paper, and other materials needed for ammunition. Campaigns such as "Mount Aluminum" in Springfield in 1941, and the "V is for Victory" drive in Maryville in 1942 helped motivate teens to do their part in the metal drive. Such is the case of some Alton, Illinois students who were photographed standing in front of the official salvage depot. Even a small girl with her broken arm in a sling did her best to support the country. Smaller children were often forced to give up metal toys for wood ones during this time. To motivate young people to be "Uncle Sam's Scrappers", prizes were given and scrap hunts were organized adventures. Some teens even went a little too far and tried to take spike and tie plates from the Illinois Central Railroad.

Many high schools allover the state played a big part in Illinois scrapping. Hirsh High School in Chicago dismantled an old factory; the students secured tons of scrap along with some minor injuries. "Future Farmers of America", another high school group

collected ten million pounds of metal by May 1943. Girls in Vandalia, Illinois gathered paper and fats. Several boys from Harper High School in Chicago averaged 10,000 pounds of waste paper a week! Sadly, metal trophies and World War I relics were also given and destroyed for the scrap hunt. As stated in the *Peoria Journal Transcript* on October 11, 1942, "Metal in that scrap pile is destined to serve the emotion which brought the pile into existence.

Both boy and girl scouts helped with the war effort. They sold war bonds and stamps. Some boy scouts in Illinois borrowed little red wagons to fasten behind their bikes to haul scrap. Girl scouts collected cooking fats from many Illinois people. In Aurora some girl scouts collected over a quarter of a million keys containing valuable nickel and brass.

Many things were collected by teens in Illinois and sent to soldiers – cigarettes, razors, books, clothing, and other things that a soldier might need. Teens also wrote letters of support to soldiers on the war front.

Teen-age power became a big part of the work force, now that many of the men were overseas. Farm work was something that became a normal wartime activity. But teenagers did much more than just farm. They also worked as riveters, draftsmen, electricians, and sheet-metal workers. War changed the lives of many of these workers. They could not manage both school and a job. Hence, school soon dropped out of their schedule due to the lure of high wages. The skills they learned on the job served them the rest of their lives.

Rationing affected the everyday life of many people including the young. As acknowledged by "Remembering the Home Front", V-book rationing of tires, automobiles, gasoline, bicycles, fuel oil, kerosene, stoves, solid fuels like coal, coffee, processed foods, meats, fats, canned fish, cheese, and canned milk, typewriters, and even rubber footwear supported the war by conserving those items for war use. Perhaps the one item that affected their lives more than the others was the rationing of sugar. This meant no chewing gum, candy, cakes, or sweets unless made with sugar alternatives. Sugar cane was used instead for gun powder, torpedo fuel, dynamite, and other wartime chemicals.

Teens also were important in the raising of Victory gardens which produced vegetables. The Victory gardens in Illinois produced the highest totals of any state. Victory gardens were important to feed our soldiers and provide hospitals, USO centers, and army camps with the food and supplies. Even flowers were grown to improve spirits among wounded soldiers. Also food raised and eaten at home meant more produced elsewhere could be sent to the war front. "The man with a Hoe" became an important figure for this home front activity. Many amateur farmers tried their hand at gardening and were bitterly disappointed, but others succeeded in helping meet the demands.

The high school teens focused their attention on other ways to assist. Wood shop classes were used to make model airplanes. These model airplanes helped the Army and Navy train people to recognize types of aircraft. War Training programs opened at night and during the summertime in the high school shops and laboratories.

Here soldiers learned trades and the new skills they needed. Nearly half a million people were trained in these programs by the end of the war. "Many high schools operated community canning centers, providing both instruction and equipment for the canning," according to wartime historian Mary Watters. Again, teenage high school students played an important role on the home front.

Collecting scrap, raising gardens, buying stamps and bonds, giving their time and money to help the war are among the many things these adolescent warriors did. They showed how much they cared about their freedom and that of the world. Without teenage power during World War II, there would have been countless problems on the home front, in the work force, and on the battle fields of Europe and Japan. [From *Alton Telegraph*, Jan. 9, 2004; Ronald H. Bailey, *The Home Front: USA*; Stan Cohen, *V for Victory: America's Home Front During World War II*; Linda Martin Erickson and Kathryn Leide, *Remembering the Home Front V-Book*; Kathleen Krull, *V is for Victory: America Remembers World War II*; Albert Marrin, *The Yanks Are Coming*; Maryville Centennial Committee *Maryville Illinois*; Mary Watters, *Illinois in the Second World War*.]